

# **Experiencing Multiculturalism through Literature: The Fruitfulness of the Student-Centered Approach of Teaching Literature**

## **Abstract**

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Extremism occurring in this world and, specifically, in Indonesia recently is one form of the failure of education which does not accommodate multiculturalism. Terrorism is obviously the result of the distorted education which only focuses on mono-cultural values. Later, this will develop exclusivism in which there is no room for pluralism. This one-sided way of communication is dangerous for multiculturalism, which is, in fact, basic for human being. Therefore, the paper will explore how literature is fruitful for the students to experience multiculturalism and freely communicating its values.

Literature is one of the best ways to lead the students to experience multiculturalism. This is supported by the fact that it is multi-interpretable. Even literature itself has so many definitions though it means nothing without appropriate appreciation. When asked to read and interpret particular literary text there will be so many ideas different one another. This is in point of fact the real representation of multiculturalism in its specific and particular definition. In addition, these colorful interpretations come about as a consequence of the different milieu of the author, the work it self and the reader: be it social, cultural, and religious background. The communication of the readers' and authors' values through literature is what most matters in teaching literature. Additionally, the teaching-learning process must emphasize more to embed, grow, and develop the affective side of the students than the cognitive one. And since the students as the readers are from different backgrounds, those differences must be highly appreciated and it will enrich the teaching-learning process. This is possible if the student-centered approach is employed consistently and should be explicitly stated in the course syllabus and also lesson plan.

To conclude, it is evident that the communication of the different and various values of life becomes the key of teaching literature in multicultural context. If this kind of teaching-learning process works well, one-sided way of communicating values, which is obviously dangerous, will no longer have a place to grow up, for the affective mission of literature is to be sensitive and to understand others. The students will be more open-minded and will not be trapped in the destructive extremism as differences are basic for human being. They will see life in this world not as black and white but as the rainbow, which is always beautiful through times.

*Key words: experiencing multiculturalism, student-centered approach, teaching literature, communication of values*

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## **A. Introduction**

Some days after Mega Kuningan bombing, 17th July 2009, a researcher on terrorism speaking in Metro TV explained that the suicide bombers in Indonesia usually lived exclusively and did not get involved with the other groups of the society. They see the world as black and white as indoctrinated by their teacher(s) that make them have no choice in this world. The teacher's strong role leads to destruction.

The previous extreme account illustrates how dangerous it is to conduct mono-sided communication. There will be hegemonic interpretation of meaning which is against the real fact of the society which is pluralistic and multicultural. In fact, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is colored by the weak national boundaries. A nation cannot avoid being influenced or even dominated by the international multi-cultures. Unfortunately, many do not pay adequate attention to this issue. If not prepared, there will be cultural shock and violence might possibly become the way out for some people. Substantively, Indonesia is already multicultural, from the beginning but, unfortunately, due to the superficial and reluctant concern, these riches are not well realized. Therefore, this paper will try to see the sights of how literature is beneficial for leading the students to experience multiculturalism, which is useful to understand others and to live in this global borderless era.

## **B. Multiculturalism: Terms and Definitions**

Multiculturalism first came to be used world-wide in the 1970s in Canada and Australia related to their policy to as the name for a key plank of government policy to support the management of ethnic pluralism within their national polity. In this case, the term is associated with the social and cultural problems concerning immigration (Bennet, 2005).

Coined by a Canadian Royal Commission in 1965, he explains furthermore that this governmental use of “multiculturalism” is widely supported and endorsed by its proponents as both a progressive political imperative and an official article of faith – a term associated in principle with the values of equality, tolerance, and inclusiveness toward migrants of ethnically different backgrounds. Canadian multiculturalism is fundamental to belief that all citizens are equal. Multiculturalism ensures that all citizens can keep their identities, can take pride in their ancestry and have a sense of belonging.

By and large, multiculturalism is a social doctrine that distinguishes itself as a positive alternative for policies of assimilation, connoting a politics of recognition of the citizenship rights and cultural identities of ethnic minority groups and, more generally, an affirmation of the value of cultural diversity. Multiculturalism is variously evoked as a response to the need to address real or potential ethnic tension and racial conflict. Essentially it is a complicated term, but to make it simpler here is a more systematic one:

Multiculturalism is a system of beliefs and behaviors that recognizes and respects the presence of all diverse groups in an organization or society, acknowledges and values their socio-cultural differences, and encourages and enables their continued contribution within an inclusive cultural context which empowers all within the organization or society (Caleb Rosado, 2006:3).

In its application, this term is usually placed based on its context: be it politics, religion, ethnicity, etc. In relation to literary study, usually the term used is multicultural literature. Since this paper is concerned more to the experiencing multiculturalism through the teaching process, the term is applied as multicultural instruction which leads the students to experience multiculturalism through literature, one of which is by applying the student-centered approach of teaching literature.

### **C. Literature: How is it Multicultural?**

How many definitions of literature are there? They are countless. Asking the students what literature, there are as many as the number of the students, even more.

What does this prove? It proves that literature is multi-interpretable and relative, and it offers possibilities in life. Literature has changed and will always be changing as human being and society change.

One thing or idea that comes from the students concerning literature is that it is imaginative writings. Though not totally wrong, it is not acceptable. And perhaps, this is the fruitless result of the teaching literature process taking place in high schools. For example, there is an account saying that the only one knowing the meaning of a particular literary work is the author. This is 'dangerous' since they will be afraid of interpreting literature and will depend on what the teachers say about the meaning of literary text.

As stated by Culler (1997) and Damono in Iswalono (2003), literature is a cultural product which is a certain time and place called as literature. Therefore, the existence of literature cannot be separated from its milieu and also its surroundings: be it social, historical, even religious background. It is not created in a vacuum condition. Literature in an era might not be called as literature in another era, and vice versa; non-literature in a particular place might be called as great literature in another place, and vice versa.

Reading literature means reading culture. In society, whose literature is read and appreciated means whose culture is having privileged. For that reason, in reading literature, students will learn other cultures and their values while communicating those values with their own. Through the communication of values, then, the multicultural communication happens. The result will be best if the student-centered approach is applied in the instruction.

#### **D. Student-Centered Approach: How is it possibly beneficial?**

"You ought to read it/It's great literature," the last two lines of Chana Bloch's "Tired Sex," show how students will not be interested in literature even the great one by simply ordering and suggesting them to read it. This is shown in the 4-7 lines of the poem. "I catch myself yawning/through the window/watching the sparrow cat/keeps batting around." This proves that the experience as the process going on in the readers' mind when reading literature/literary text is far more important than the

didactic approach used by the teacher. This kind of teaching will not work and useless in appreciating literary text and this is analogous to Bloch's first three lines "We're trying to strike a match in a match book/That has lain all winter under the woodpile:/Damp sulphur." This idea is supported by some great figures in education and literary study.

John Dewey in his book entitled *Democracy and Education* published in 1916 says, "[t]here is the standing danger that the material of formal instruction will be merely the subject matter of the schools, isolated from the subject matter of life-experience" (1916:8). In addition, Wolfgang Iser (1978) in *The Act of Reading* says, "the readers construct images of the stories using their past experiences; readers select books based on the connection between the book and their life experiences." From this point of view, it is shown that as a result of the readers bringing their experiences and feelings to their reading, students develop a deeper understanding of literature. Reader response theorists thus reject the concept that literature has some objective meaning or truth, or that a teacher has the correct interpretation of the literature.

Barton and Booth (1990) claim that the importance of a curriculum is to develop students' own capacities and intelligence rather than transmitting knowledge and facts. They propose that the function of curriculum is to nurture students' original thinking, to connect the learning of literature to their individual needs, and to give them diverse experiences. In order to attain these goals, they focus on their inner lives by focusing on developing their problem solving skills and stimulating their intellect and imagination.

They propose that "our goal of response must be one of deepest learning, not of leading children to solve a puzzle that we have designed and of which we know the outcome." Instead, they claim that "we must help children through their own story mazes, arming them for battle, nursing their wounds, giving them sustenance, sharing our wisdom" (1990:91). Teachers need to change from an "all knowing sage" to a "participant in the exploration" (1990:8). A teacher who knows what students want to achieve, and how students get there, is more important than a teacher who is an "all knowing sage." Also, their curriculum aim is to share this individual heritage with others, "... to make new meanings and help structure the events of their own lives" (1990:9).

The student-centered approach is based on Dewey's (1916) theories that the purpose of education is to cultivate *individual differences* and to develop their *independence of character while bringing students into full participation in society*. In order to cultivate individual differences, Dewey claims that learning comes from children's direct experience rather than from inculcating facts and values through books and lectures. Furthermore, he emphasizes that education should share the body of knowledge and wisdom developed by humanity and help the progress of society. His philosophy is based on the belief that individual thoughts and ideas are important and can be shared with others. Thus, participation in the knowledge and wisdom of the larger community must be stressed.

The student-centered approach is related to the transformation position in Miller's (1985) curriculum framework. The transformation position focuses on personal and social change in the teaching and learning processes. In this position, the teacher promotes the development of diverse thinking by focusing on students' individual inner lives. In the teaching process, the teacher pays attention to how students' inner lives relate to the outer world by focusing on students' social awareness. Thus, the function of a curriculum is to affect students individually as well as to affect the group as a whole.

In teaching method, creative thinking strategies, invitational teaching, cooperative learning and movement education, etc. are used. There is much less hierarchy and teachers have strong relationships with each other. Teacher's professional development stresses students' mental care and their social awareness. Thus, interviews, journal records, observations, questionnaires, self-evaluation and peer evaluation etc. are used for evaluation (Miller, 1985).

#### **E. Communication of Values: the Ultimate Goal of Teaching Literature**

(Oemarjati, 1996:196) states that the ultimate goal of teaching literature is to embed, to grow, and to develop students' sensitivity towards human's problem, the introduction of the respect of individual and social values. So, basically the mission of teaching literature is affective, to enrich student's experience and train them to become more sympathetic to their surroundings.

Generally the scope of literary theme includes three essential part of human's life: religion, social and personal (Oemarjati, 1996:198). Therefore, teaching literature must achieve the outcomes: students' sensitivity towards the value of sense, logic, affective, social, or the combination of them. Literature does not give 'ready to use' knowledge as in chemistry, for instance. Literature offers possibilities in response to certain problems proposed by the author. 'Reality' in literature is not to be checked in relation to real life, but to educate its readers to 'dive' more deeply in order to get some values of life. That is why literature gives students possibilities in life and new 'experiences' without giving 'real' burden and disappointment to them. Being familiar to literature means preparing for some possibilities someday needed for comparison can be used by the readers to make some decisions in their life. Once again, for emphasis, literature has affective mission: understanding others and building multicultural communication.

#### **F. Multicultural Instruction: Some Rationales**

Since reading literature means reading culture(s), the multicultural instruction is unavoidable. Hence, literature is a powerful and efficient medium for understanding the world. The new information and knowledge is unconsciously learned by the readers, especially, young readers, when it is presented in a story. In "What is Multicultural/Diverse Perspective Instruction?" there are some important ideas concerning the multicultural experience (1997).

First, experts on multicultural education emphasize the importance of using literature to increase cultural awareness. The literature used should accurately portray the history, customs, values, and language of a particular cultural group. Through sharing carefully selected literature, students can learn to understand and to appreciate a literary heritage that comes from many diverse backgrounds. This is called as cultural authenticity.

Second, students also benefit from reading literature that reflects their own ethnic and cultural background. Such literature can be an important tool in helping all students develop a healthy self-concept - one that is based on knowledge of and a

sense of pride in family background. This second idea is called as improving self-concept.

Third, the use of multicultural literature can also extend students' knowledge about parallel cultures by exposing them to the differences and similarities between their culture and that of other groups. These observations support the notion that incorporating multicultural literature into the curriculum can expand students' awareness and decrease negative stereotyping of individuals from other cultures. This point is labeled as promoting understanding among cultures.

In short, literature can present students with clear contrasts in perspectives and can help them understand their own cultural heritages and those of others - within and outside the classroom.

### **G. Experiencing Multiculturalism through Literature: A Case Study**

Through the discussion of the irony of the poem, students might learn simple lesson on multiculturalism, of the reality that they might face in their own society but they might not realize. The literary work, in this case a poem, is chosen for particular reason concerning the cultural values within it. Based on Rosado's definition, multiculturalism in literature does not necessarily contain ethnicities; it might be about particular cultural groups in a society.

#### **Tess Gallagher I Stop Writing the Poem**

to fold the clothes. No matter who lives  
or who dies, I'm still a woman.  
I'll always have plenty to do.  
I bring the arms of his shirt  
together. Nothing can stop 5  
out tenderness. I'll get back  
to the poem. I'll get back to being  
a woman. But for now  
there's a shirt, a giant shirt  
in my hands, and somewhere a small girl 10  
standing next to her mother  
watching to see how it's done.



The teaching approach might include: group discussion, group and individual response, interview, etc. The students are asked about what is so interesting about the poem, the irony, the subject, and also the theme. Contextually, they have to relate the subject to the reality they face in their society, the problems that might exist, and how are they solved culturally. In this part, original response of the students must be highly appreciated.

One of the results of the appreciation of the poem might possibly be like the following accounts. This is about a woman, a marginalized group in a society, who is in a dilemmatic situation as a woman. She has to stop doing what she likes (writing the poem) for she has got another 'duty,' folding clothes. Folding clothes is a kind of synecdoche, representing all domestic jobs usually done by a woman. The problem is the pronoun 'his,' which gives an idea about his husband's: male domination.

Lines 1-8 show her complicated situation as a woman: *she is a woman when she is writing a poem; at the same time, she is also a woman when she is folding the clothes*. At present, the greater problem comes in the 8-9 lines, emphasized by the use of 'but,' "But for now/there's a shirt, a giant shirt/in my hands." Of course, *giant* does not mean that her husband is big, but it represents *the great burden of the domestic jobs that cannot be left*.

The irony is shown in lines 10-12. Such a terrible situation for a woman apparently will not stop for now because her daughter and many other daughter will be in the same position in the future in some other places, "and somewhere a small girl/standing next to her mother/watching to see how it's done."

This is a sample of an interpretation of the poem, the students might have another interpretation as long as it is acceptable related to the text and context. But, basically in relation to the multicultural issue, the students might learn from the poem that there is a small social group in the society which is still marginalized and oppressed culturally by other groups. They are supposed to respond to that situation and be more sympathetic to such kind of problems in the society.

## **H. Conclusion**

If human beings understand and are sympathetic one another, certainly the world will be more beautiful and peaceful. There will be less war, terror, killing, invasion, oppression, and many other conflicts among different ethnics and social groups. Violence is not a solution; it only leads to destruction. Multiculturalism is like a rainbow - the truth - which only the innocent people will see and feel (inspired by Wordsworth's lines). As shown by Dickinson in her poem entitled "There is no frigate like a book," literature is the powerful and efficient way to learn and understand others' problems, experiences, cultures and they way they deal with that. This communication of values of cultures is best applied and supported through the enriching student-centered approach of teaching literature.

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